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The Methodist Church vs. Slavery.

The testimony of the Methodist Episcopal Church has ever been against slavery and in favor of Emancipation. She has always insisted on the duty of the Christian Church, seeking the extirpation of the evil of slavery consistently with the laws of the land. This has been her position from the first origin of her societies on this continent; and though the measures adopted at different periods have varied, as the circumstances seemed, in the estimation of her councils, to require, yet in the main object, she has never faltered for a moment.

1. In support of this position we shall appeal to the testimony of Mr. Wesley the founder of the Methodist Societies both in Europe and America. 2. To the history and discipline of the Methodist Church, and if need be, to the corroborative testimony of the standard writers of the Methodist at different periods. Mr. Wesley published his tract on slavery in 1774; before the war of the Revolution, and ten years previous to the organization of the American Methodist societies into a distinct church under his advice. This tract contains some 15 pages octavo in the volume of his standard works published by the Methodist Book Concern, New York. It gives a clear and forcible view of the slave trade, the character of slavery, and the duties of slaveholders. This tract is well worth the careful perusal of all persons wishing to be informed on the history, origin and character of African Slavery in America. After setting this forth in various ways Mr. Wesley proceeds to say—(page 28.) "But waving all other considerations I strike at the root of this complicated villainy. I absolutely deny all slaveholding to be consistent with any degree of natural justice."

"I cannot place this in a clearer light than that great ornament of his profession Judge Blackstone, has done. Part of his words are as follows:—The three origins of the Right of Slavery assigned by Justinian are all built upon false foundations—(1.) Slavery is said to arise from captivity in war. The conqueror having a right to the life of his captive, if he spares him, he has then a right to deal with him as he pleases. But this is untrue if taken generally—that by the laws of nations, a man has a right to kill his enemy. He has only a right to kill him in particular cases, in cases of absolute necessity for self-defense. And it is plain this absolute necessity did not subsist since he did not kill him but make him prisoner. War it is self-defensible only on principles of self-preservation; therefore, it gives us no right to prisoners, but to hinder them from hurting us, by confining them. Much less can we give a right to torture or kill or even to enslave them after the war is over. Since, therefore, the right of making our prisoners slaves depends on the supposed right of slaughter, that foundation failing, the consequence which is drawn from it must fall away."

(2.) It is said slavery may begin by one man selling himself to another. And it is true, a man may sell himself to work for another. But he cannot sell himself to be a slave as above defined. Every slave implies an equivalent given to the seller in lieu of what he transfers to the buyer. But what equivalent can be given for life and liberty? His property likewise, with the very price which he seems to receive, devolves upon the fact to his master the instant he becomes a slave; in this case, therefore, the buyer gives nothing and the seller receives nothing. Of what validity then can a sale be which destroys the very principle upon which all sales are founded?

(3.) We are told that men may be born slaves by being the children of slaves. But this being built upon the two former rights, must fall together with them. If neither captivity nor contract can, by the plain law of nature and reason, reduce the parent to slavery, much less can they reduce the offspring. It clearly follows then, that slavery is as irreconcilable to justice as to argument. Throughout the whole of this argument, of which the above quotation from Blackstone constitutes a part, Mr. Wesley earnestly contends that not only the slave trade, but also the slavery growing out of it, is inconsistent with the plain principles of natural justice as well as of humanity and religion. In the application, after giving his views of the origin and character of slavery, he thus addresses the American holders of slaves: "It equally concerns every gentleman that has an estate in our American plantations, yes, all slaveholders of every rank and degree, being non-buyers are exactly on a level with non-stealers." Indeed you say "I pay honestly for my goods and I am not concerned to know how they are come by." Nay, but you are, deeply concerned to know they are honestly come by. Otherwise you are a partner with a thief and are not a jot honest than he. But you know they are not honestly come by; you know they are procured by means not so innocent as picking pockets, house-breaking, or robbing on the highway. You know they are procured by a deliberate series of more complicated villainy (of fraud, robbery, and murder), than was ever practiced by either Mohammedans or Pagans; in particular by murders of all kinds; by the blood of the innocent poured upon the ground like water. Now it is your money that pays the merchant and through him the captain and the African butchers. You, therefore, are guilty; yes, principally guilty of those frauds, robberies and murders. You are the spring that puts all the rest in motion; they would not stir a step without you; therefore the blood of all these wretches who die before their time, whether in their country or elsewhere, lies upon your head. "The blood of thy brother" (for whether you will believe it or no, such he is in the sight of him that made time) "crieth against thee from the earth." O, what ever it cost, put a stop to its cry before it be instantly at its cry, or you will be

blood-guilty! Thy hands, thy bed, thy furniture, thy house, thy lands are at present stained with blood. Surely it is enough; accumulate no more guilt; spill no more blood of the innocent! Do not hire another to shed blood; do not pay him for doing it! Whether you are a Christian or not, show yourself a man! Be not more savage than a bear! Perhaps you will say, "I do not buy any negroes, I only use those left me by my father." So far is well; but it is not enough to satisfy your conscience! Had your father, have you, any man living, a right to use another as a slave? It cannot be, even setting revelation aside.

"It cannot be, that either war or contract, can give any man such a property in another as he has in his sheep and oxen. Much less is it possible that any child of man should ever be born a slave. Liberty is the right of every human creature, as soon as he breathes the vital air; and no human law can deprive him of that right which he derives from the law of nature."

"If, therefore, you have any regard to justice (to say nothing of mercy or the revealed law of God,) render to all their due. Give liberty to whom liberty is due; that is, to every child of man, to every partaker of human nature. Let none serve you but by his own act and deed, by his own voluntary choice. Away with all whips, all chains, all compulsion! Be gentle toward all men; and see that you invariably do unto every one as you would he should do unto you." Many passages might be cited from the works of Mr. Wesley, showing that it was his mature and deliberate judgment, that slavery, as it exists in America, is a flagrant violation of the plainest natural rights of man, absolutely inconsistent with the exercise of the plainest principles of justice, religion or humanity—deeply and awfully criminal on the part of the kidnapper, the slave trader and the slaveholder who purchased them for his plantation. The slaveholder on the plantations is regarded as so deeply stained with innocent blood and robbery, that the curse rests on his estate and descends with it as an inheritance to his children. In his opinion, to remove the cleaving curse from themselves, the posterity of slaveholders must wash it out by an act of justice to the posterity of the slave. They must free them. We think none will deny that Mr. Wesley was opposed to slavery on moral grounds, or that he regarded Emancipation as the plain moral duty of "slaveholders of every rank and degree." Nearly all the standard writers among the Methodists have held and expressed views more or less strikingly similar to those of Mr. Wesley, but for fear of making this article too long, we will reserve the citations for the present. But should the assertion be questioned, we shall hold ourselves responsible to produce the evidence at a future time. The views of the tract from which we have made these extracts were entertained by nearly all the first Methodist preachers in this country. That such a tract, put forth by a man occupying Mr. Wesley's position towards the Methodist Society should make a deep impression on both the ministry and membership of his societies, was most naturally to be expected. Accordingly we find pointed testimonies against it in the conferences before the societies were organized into a distinct church, but as they did not come with the sanction of ecclesiastical authority at that time we will not burden our pages with a citation of them for the present.

Dr. Bangs in his history of the Methodist Episcopal Church informs us upon the authority of Mr. Lee; a historian of the Methodists of the time alluded to; that at the organization of the church, they adopted the following rule on slavery, which, for reasons mentioned were not published for some time afterward. We give the rule as we find it in Bangs' history, not stopping for the present to offer his reasons for the delay of its publication. (See Bangs' History, vol. 1, page 216, 217.)

"Every member of our society who has slaves in those States where the laws admit of freeing them, shall, after notice given him by the preacher, within twelve months (except in Virginia, and there in two years) legally execute and record an instrument, whereby he sets free every slave in his possession, those who are from forty to forty-five immediately, or at farthest, at the age of forty-five; those who are between the ages of twenty-five and forty immediately, or within the course of five years; those who are between the ages of twenty and twenty-five immediately, or at farthest, by the age of thirty; those who are under the age of twenty, as soon as they are twenty-five at farthest, and every infant immediately on its birth."

"Every person concerned who will not comply with these rules, shall have liberty quietly to withdraw from our society within the twelve months following, the notice being given as aforesaid. Otherwise the assent (the Minister in charge,) shall exclude him from the society."

"No person holding slaves shall, in future, be admitted into the society, or to the Lord's Supper, till he previously comply with these rules concerning slavery. Those who buy or sell slaves, or give them away, unless on purpose to free them shall be expelled immediately."

"These rules" says Lee, "were short lived," and Dr. Bangs proceeds to remark, that they gave such general offence, and were found to be of such difficult execution that at the next conference they were suspended. But at the end of the minute recording, at the end of the conference suspending them, a N. B. was added to this effect:

"N. B. We do hold in the deepest abhorrence the practice of slavery, and shall not cease to seek its destruction by all wise and prudent means."

rated the South from the North, and whatever change may have occurred among individual ministers or members of the church South on this subject, the church as a body stands pledged before Heaven and Earth to the old conservative anti-slavery ground of the Methodist Episcopal church prior to 1844, and if the Northern portion of the church have not changed their ground since that dispute, our ground upon slavery throughout the whole church, North and South, is identically the same as that of the united Methodist Episcopal church previous to the separation.

A moment's attention to the rules and regulations adopted from time to time by the general conference, will justify the conclusion that from the beginning the Methodist Church has occupied high anti-slavery ground. In 1780, they affirmed "slavery to be contrary to the dictates of conscience and pure religion," and passed sentence of disapprobation on all their friends who held slaves, and advised their freedom. In 1784, they repeat the solemn protest, and the Conference held December 27, 1784, adopted the regulations briefly recited above—in 1796 they adopted, substantially, what is now found in the IX Section of the Discipline of the Methodist E. Church South, with some rules touching the admission of slaveholders to the Church, and the treatment of such as became purchasers of slaves. In 1816, they say, "We declare that we are as much as ever convinced of the great evil of slavery; therefore, no slaveholder shall be eligible to any official station in our Church hereafter, where the laws of the State in which he lives will admit of emancipation, and permit the liberated slave to enjoy freedom." In 1824, the IX Section assumed, in the hands of the General Conference, its present form. We have now shown that from the beginning the Methodist Church has borne a firm and consistent testimony against slavery, and urged upon her friends every where to emancipate their slaves where it could be done without conflict with the civil powers.

Many are willing to admit this, and it has been denounced by some of its former friends as an association of abolitionists, and that the South was compelled to wash out this stain by dissolving her connection with the North. We are acquainted with the grounds of this unhappy controversy about slavery which resulted in disunion; and, therefore, cannot admit the conclusion that the Church South is not anti-slavery. She has avowed herself such in the sight of Heaven and earth. If any doubt, we will demonstrate it. Bear in mind the position of the Church on the 1st Monday in May, 1844, when the General Conference met in the City of New York. The North and the South stood on the same platform, holding the same anti-slavery discipline! Then, and there, commenced the struggle whose end is not yet. But, was it an effort on the part of the South to change the law on the subject of Slavery? No; the whole Southern delegation declared themselves perfectly satisfied with the discipline on the subject of slavery—but they objected to the manner in which it was administered. The case of Mr. Harding which came up by appeal from the decision of the Baltimore Conference brought on the conflict. The appeal was prosecuted by Rev. W. A. Smith, D. D., of the Virginia Conference, one of the most prominent and influential men in the Church. In that masterly argument, he said: [See Debates of the General Conference, page 18.] "I appear before the General Conference at the instance of the appellant, to state his case according to the best of my ability. In entering upon this duty, especially as it involves the question of Slavery, it is proper that I should make a few preliminary observations personal to myself. My opinions on this subject have been made up for years. But these opinions have never been permitted, with me, so far as I am competent to understand myself, to originate unchristian feelings towards any honest man who differs with me. I have always held myself, and now do, an anti-slavery man, not, however, an abolitionist in any sense of the word, and in this, I differ not from my Methodist brethren in the ministry or out of it." Again, page 26, Debates of General Conference, 1844, he says: "I stand by the Methodist discipline, and if any man claims to be a conservative, and will not stand on the same broad platform, I deny that he is one, and will contest it every inch. I repeat, our discipline is conservative. Hear it, 'What shall be done for the extirpation of the evil of slavery?' Ans. 1. We are as much as ever convinced of the great evil of slavery." I believe it—with all my heart I subscribe to it. And I repeat that language with a feeling that none but those from the South, like circumstances, can possibly do. I say it is an evil because I feel it to be an evil. And who cannot say the same that has trod the soil of the South? It is an evil—the discipline declares the truth, the whole truth, and so far as relates to this case, nothing but the truth; and a truth which, from our connection with the subject, we are not ashamed to proclaim upon the house-tops, here or elsewhere. But while the discipline deprecates the evil of slavery, it requires the members of the Church, within those States, to conform their action to the rules or laws of those States in which they live. This is assuming the doctrine that though slavery is an evil, and a great evil, it is not necessarily a sin. This is conservatism." Page 27, he says: "We say that slavery is an evil, that Southern people know and feel it to be an evil. Who knows how much the South is to be benefited by it? And who more than those who have been compelled to submit to it from our cradle to the present moment? Who knows it so well to be an evil as they who but a few years ago were ready to take legislative action on the subject?"

"We felt the evils and groaned under them so deeply, and so heartily did we long to get rid of them, that from the debates in 1834 in the Virginia Legislature, and the popular sentiment expressed in the pulpit and through the press, no doubts were entertained that the State was about to adopt immediate measures for its gradual extinction." Page 44, he says, "I affirmed in my opening speech that the South is not pro-slavery but anti-slavery. The Georgia and South Carolina delegations, who came from the South on this floor,

united in a most hearty response to the appeal I made to them on this point. No sir, we are not converted—we stand on the same ground we have occupied from the foundation of the Church—the grand conservative ground laid down by our fathers in the Book of Discipline."

The decision of the General Conference in the case of Harding is sufficiently understood by the public; as is also its subsequent action in relation to Bishop Andrew. To the protest of the Southern delegation following it, we must look for the true position of the Church South on the subject of slavery. The protest was drawn up by Dr. Bassom, of Kentucky, and signed by the entire Southern delegation. In that protest they say: "The law of the Church on slavery has always existed since 1785, but especially since 1803, and in view of the adjustment in 1816, as a virtual though informal contract of mutual concession and forbearance between the North and the South, then, as now known and existing as distinct parties in relation to the question of slavery and abolition. Those concessions found in the States where slavery prevailed, constituting the Southern party, and those in the non-slaveholding States the Northern—exceptions to the rule being therein made in the North."

The Southern Conference agreeing in the main principles of the compromise law in 1804 and 1816, conceded by express stipulation their right to resist Northern interference, in any form, upon the condition pledged by the North, that while the whole Church, by common consent, united in proper effort for the mitigation and final removal of the evil of slavery, the North was not to interfere by excluding from membership or ministerial office in the Church, persons owning slaves in States where emancipation is not practicable, and where the liberated slave is not permitted to enjoy freedom." (Debates General Conference, 1844, page 205.) "The ministry, making this protest, are perfectly satisfied with the law of the Church affecting slavery and abolition. They ask no change." Page 206. Here then the whole Southern delegation avow the same high anti-slavery principles, and take position with Dr. Smith and the discipline. They acknowledge the Southern Church bound by common consent to labor for the mitigation and final removal of the evil of slavery. Thus up to the close of General Conference of 1844, we have every Southern delegate declaring in the most solemn manner that they, and the congregations committed to their care were anti-slavery throughout. Not abolitionists seeking to break the ties of master and slave, without regard to the rights or interests of either, but conservative men feeling deeply "the great evil of slavery," and bound in solemn "compact," to use the language of the protest, to seek its "final removal" in a legal and constitutional way. These are the avowals of the Southern Church made at the very beginning—they have been her avowals ever since, they are her avowals to this day, and they are as much truth as I might say, and with as much truth as myself, I am a democrat, a Jeffersonian democrat, but he could not deceive or beguile the democrats of the present day. He is known to the whole people, that you are a democrat, known as a whig within certain circles. Now, I ask, is it fair, is it honest, for you, a minister of the gospel, to deceive democrats for the purpose of gaining political credit amongst them? I do not think it is. I mean to say, that the language of the protest, as a language unbecoming your situation as a preacher of the gospel of the meek and lowly Jesus, in whom there was neither deceit nor guile, is a language unworthy of you, and that you are a democrat, and that you are a whig, a Heary Clay whig, and quite a bit of a whig, as parties are at present divided. In Clay might say, and with as much truth as myself, I am a democrat, a Jeffersonian democrat, but he could not deceive or beguile the democrats of the present day. He is known to the whole people, that you are a democrat, known as a whig within certain circles. 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